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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study documents and interprets key school, work, and family life issues in the lives and experiences of a sampling of recent immigrants from the war-torn Central American nations; and suggests a psychocultural theory of achievement motivation. Information was gathered from observation in two urban high schools, interviews with 50 Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Nicaraguan students and their families, and their responses to the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). The following summary findings are reported: (1) in many respects, the Central Americans fit the ordinary American immigrant pattern; (2) escape from an environment of political terrorism and limited economic opportunity has a significant negative psychologica effect on the students; (3) student perceptions of parental sacrifice are intertwined with their achievement motivation; (4) students used a dual frame of reference, comparing opportunities in their former home with opportunities in America, when assessing ongoing experiences and planning for the future; (5) student achievement aspirations are based on the desire to help others, as opposed to an individualistic concern for self-advancement and independence; (6) achievement motivation was also affected by a sense of guilt over their opportunity to leave Central America while other family members could not; and (7) students encountered educational barriers including "gatekeeping" techniques used in the schools, the need to work for a living, and legal problems. Seven tables of statistical data and three examples of adapted thematic apperception cards are included. A list of 195 references and an index are appended. (FMW)

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